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Tight budget worries EPA official

Special to the Inter Lake

LIBBY — Cuts in national spending may become a factor in the EPA's annual budget for the Libby Superfund cleanup.

"We are facing some exceptionally tight budget times in Washington, D.C., and we could feel some of that here," reported Libby on-site coordinator Jim Christiansen to the Community Advisory Group last week.

The Libby cleanup budget for the current fiscal year was 75-80 percent of what had been asked for, he said. Christiansen had requested \$21.1 million and received \$17.6 million. The EPA's Region 8 kicked in another \$300,000.

Because of the cutback in funding, the EPA was unable to begin investigation of the vermiculite mine site or start cleanup efforts on the Flyway and bluffs property near the former sorting plant near Rainy Creek.

"I have to make a lot of tough deci-

sions on cleanup," Christiansen said. "It's not pleasant, and a lot of those decisions have been driven by budget."

The Libby cleanup continues to be a priority for the federal agency, he said. Christiansen is expecting a budget of about \$20 million for the coming year, and probably for several years to come, barring the unforeseen.

"I was somewhat more optimistic a month ago than I am now," he said of the budget for fiscal 2003-2004.

Investigation of the vermiculite mine site would be the first thing to be cut if there is less money, Christiansen said.

"The second thing I will do is delay the investigation in Troy," he said.

The priority for the Libby cleanup will continue to be staying on schedule and keeping within projected costs, Christiansen said.

"Again, I have to stress: We do not know if we're going to see anything (cuts), but I can hear the rumblings," he said.